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ABSTRACT

The effects of labels, "mentally retarded" and "institutionalized" on the evaluations and causal attributions of nonretarded persons, and on the social distance preferences of EMR persons, were assessed. In addition, each group was asked to predict the likelihood of a labeled (mentally retarded) or a nonlabeled target person achieving success at a cognitive task and at three social behaviors (getting a job, getting married and having children). Results indicated that college students maintain a patronizing attitude toward mentally retarded persons--giving them less credit for their successes and less blame for their failures than they give to nonretarded persons. They also tended to make situational attributions for the behavioral outcomes of retarded persons, whether they were successful or not. Results with the two samples of retarded persons indicated that they were aware of the stigma associated with the retarded and institutional labels, and that they had the same low expectations for future success from (other) labeled persons (peers) that college students had. However, they appeared to have somewhat more optimistic expectations for their own chances of success than for the chances of other retarded persons. (Author/BMW)

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Reactions to the labels "Institutionalized" and "Mentally Retarded" by retarded and nonretarded persons

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Abstract

Three studies are described which assessed the effects of the labels "mentally retarded" and "institutionalized" on the evaluations and causal attributions of nonretarded persons and on the social distance preferences of EMR persons. In addition, each group was asked to predict the likelihood of a labeled (mentally retarded) or a nonlabeled target person achieving success at a cognitive task and at three social behaviors (getting a job, getting married and having children). Results indicated that college students maintain a patronizing attitude toward mentally retarded persons -- giving them less credit for their successes and less blame for their failures than they give to nonretarded persons. They also tend to make situational attributions for the behavioral outcomes of retarded persons, whether they have been successful or not (e.g., "they succeeded because of luck"). Results with the two samples of retarded persons indicated that they are aware of the stigma associated with the retarded and institutional labels, and that they have the same low expectations for future success from (other) labeled persons -- peers -- that college students have. However, they do appear to have somewhat more optimistic expectations for their own chances of success than for the chances of another retarded person.

Reactions to the labels "Institutionalized" and "Mentally Retarded" by retarded and nonretarded persons

Few areas of research have generated as much controversy as the "self-fulfilling prophecy" studies of Rosenthal and his colleagues (e.g., Rosenthal & Jacobsen, 1966). The possibility that a label of some kind, by itself, can effect both a teacher's expectancy for a student's behavior and the student's actual behavior is a disturbing prospect. Consequently, a considerable amount of research has been conducted by social scientists in various fields in order to determine what effect, if any, labels have upon the attitudes and behavior of people who are interacting with labeled persons.

Early work by people interested in the mental retardation label (e.g., Edgerton, 1967; Rucker, 1968) suggested that this label typically evokes unfavorable attitudes from people. However, more recent research has indicated that the label may not necessarily produce negative consequences for retarded persons. MacMillan, Jones and Aloia (1974) reviewed the relevant research in this area and came up with the conclusion that there is no clear evidence that the label, by itself, leads to unfavorable treatment for labeled persons. The same conclusion was reached by Gottlieb (1974). In fact, several studies have been conducted which have indicated that the label may actually have a favorable effect on mentally retarded persons. In one such study, Goodman, Gottlieb and Harrison (1972) found that certain behaviors which are expected and tolerated from mentally retarded children

are not tolerated when performed by a child who is not known to be retarded.

In this sense, the retardation label appears to be helpful in that it excuses some kinds of unacceptable behavior that might otherwise be punished (see Budoff & Siperstein, 1978; Foley, 1979). An example of this can be found in a study by Farina, Thaw, Felner and Hust (1976) in which mentally retarded children were treated much more leniently than nonretarded children when they failed on a simple learning task. Similar research conducted with handicapped target persons (Weiner & Kukla, 1970) indicated that they are also blamed less for failure than are nonhandicapped persons. The authors suggest that this is because the failures of handicapped people are attributed to a general lack of ability rather than to a lack of effort or motivation as is typically the case with nonhandicapped persons. Further, as Jones and de-Charms (1957) demonstrated, people whose failure is attributed to a lack of ability are usually liked more than persons who have ability, but who fail because they have not tried hard enough.

If the "favorable" treatment, such as that demonstrated toward retarded children in the Farina et al research, is the result of a low ability attribution, then there is reason to believe that this kind of "positive prejudice" may, in the long run, prove detrimental to the labeled person. The reason being that attributing failure to a stable internal trait such as (low) ability, rather than to an unstable trait such as low effort, reflects a low expectation that the person will succeed in the future (Weiner and Kukla, 1970). Recent research by Severance and Gasstrom (1977) has suggested that this may be the case for mentally retarded persons. In that study college

students were asked to make causal attributions for the successful or unsuccessful behavior of either a child labeled as retarded or a nonlabeled child who was working on a jigsaw puzzle. As expected, the students tended to attribute failure to (low) ability and success to (high) effort more so for the retarded than for the nonretarded child. In addition, their subjects also reported lower predictions of success from the mentally retarded child if she were to attempt the puzzle again.

Although the task involved in the Severance and Gasstrom (1977) study was a cognitive one, their results still suggest that the favorable treatment that mentally retarded persons receive in the form of less blame for failure may be accompanied by a generally low expectation for future success. This question was tested in the series of experiments discussed here. Specifically, does the mental retardation label evoke low expectations of future successful behaviors from nonretarded and from retarded persons?

Experiment I

Seventy-seven male and female college students read a bogus transcript of an interview conducted with a 17-year-old girl who was either labeled as educable mentally retarded or not labeled. The girl's answers during the interview presented her in either a favorable (successful in life) or unfavorable light. Subjects were then asked to evaluate the girl on a number of adjectives (likeable, intelligent, competent, hardworking, mature and independent) and two social distance questions. They were then asked to make causal attributions for the girl's behavior (i.e., for her general performance in life, including working, going to school, etc., all of which were

discussed during the interview). Finally, they were asked to make predictions for her future success in life, including getting a good job, getting married and having children.

Results

As in the Severance and Gasstrom study, ability was seen as much more important, and effort less important (p's < .001 and .02 respectively) in explaining the failure of the retarded child than the nonretarded child. Of particular interest was the fact that luck was seen as having a much greater influence on the retarded girl's life than on the nonretarded girl's life. In general, the retarded person was seen as being much less in control of her life than was the nonretarded person as evidenced by the questions: "Is this person's success (lack of success) due to things which have happened to them?... (or)...Their own doing?" and "What do you think is responsible for this? (i.e., how they are doing) The person?...(or)...Things which have happened to them?" For each question, subjects made more situational attributions for the retarded person than for the nonretarded person (p's < .001) -- as they blamed her failure and credited her success more to things which had happened to her rather than her own doing. (The means for these questions are presented in Table 1.) The retarded girl was also seen as much less likely to do better in life if she put more effort into what she was doing (p < .001).

Insert Table 1 about here

The results on the social distance and adjective questions were quite

similar to each other: the retarded girl received more favorable evaluations when she failed than did the corresponding nonretarded girl; however, the opposite occurred in the success condition. This same pattern occurred on the "social success" questions -- job, marriage and kids (see Table 1). Again, the retarded girl received more favorable evaluations in the unsuccessful condition (i.e., she was seen as more likely to succeed in the future, $p < .07$), while the successful, retarded girl was seen as significantly less likely to succeed ($p < .05$).

Discussion

The major finding of this study was that the retarded person was thought to have much less control of her life and, as a consequence, she was seen as much less likely to succeed in the future regardless of the amount of energy she expended. In effect, the retarded person received much less blame for her failures (cf. Farina et al, 1974) and much less credit for her successes than did the nonretarded girl. This type of patronizing attitude does appear to benefit the retarded person, particularly the retarded child who is more likely to fail at various tasks and behaviors than is a nonretarded child. Letting the retarded child "off the hook," so to speak after s/he fails may make life temporarily easier for him/her, but the long term effects appear to be anything but beneficial. Not blaming a person for their failures and not crediting them for their successes not only reflects a low estimation of their abilities but it also can have the effect of reducing that person's own expectations for success and, consequently, their motivation to succeed. In other words, if the person comes to the conclusion that his or her behavior

is primarily determined by luck or other exogenous factors over which s/he has no control, then increased effort becomes pointless, and motivation declines.

Experiment II

We started off in this paper by talking about self-fulfilling prophecies and the possibility that certain labeled groups may begin to demonstrate the behavior that is expected of them, presumably because they too have accepted and internalized these expectations. The first experiment demonstrated clearly that the retardation label is associated with a "patronizing" attitude, characterized primarily by a low expectation of success from labeled persons. The second and third experiments examined the question raised by Rosenthal's research which is to what extent have the labeled persons themselves come to realize and accept the attitudes associated with their label. Actually there were three questions to be answered by the second and third experiments. First, are retarded persons aware of the stigma associated with mental retardation and with state institutions for the mentally retarded? Second, do mentally retarded children and young adults maintain a pessimistic outlook regarding the future behavioral outcomes of persons labeled mentally retarded, as do college students? Third, do mentally retarded children have the same low expectations for their own future successes that they (may) have for other mentally retarded persons?

The purpose of the second experiment, then, was to ascertain whether or not the label (in this case the label referred to a state institution for mentally retarded persons) has an effect on the evaluations and social

distance preferences of mentally retarded adolescents. A modified version of the method employed in the first experiment was used again in which 34 male and 25 female educable mentally retarded persons, ages 16-38, were read a story about a person of the same sex (as the subject) who was either succeeding or not succeeding in their daily activities (e.g., going to school, at work, etc.). In addition, the person either lived in a state school for mentally retarded persons, or at a local address. After hearing the story, subjects were asked to evaluate the person on a number of adjectives and social distance questions. They were then read a second story about a different person whose behavioral outcomes were the same as those of the first person, but who had a different label (i.e., they were living in an institution if the first person was not, and vice-versa). Upon completion of this story, they were asked to compare the institutionalized and noninstitutionalized persons on a number of traits (e.g., "Which one is friendlier?") and social distance items ("Which one would you prefer to have as a friend?")

Results

There were no differences between the ratings given to the labeled and the nonlabeled persons on the adjectives. However, the responses on the social distance questions did provide evidence that these retarded persons were aware of the stigma associated with living in an institution for mentally retarded persons (cf. Bogdan, 1976, p. 49). A multivariate analysis of variance performed on the social distance questions revealed a main effect of residence label ($p < .04$), as the nonretarded person was preferred sociometrically over the retarded person. (These means are

presented in Table 2). Similar results occurred on the social distance/ comparison questions, on which the nonretarded person was again preferred ($p < .02$).[1]

Insert Table 2 about here

Experiment III

The second study provided us with results which suggested that mentally retarded adolescents do recognize the label and respond in an interpretable manner to it. The third study extended this research by looking at what effect the retardation label has upon retarded adolescents' expectations of success on both cognitive and social behavior. The prediction was that their expectations would closely resemble those of the college students in the first experiment.

Design. Subjects were 29 male and 16 female educable mentally retarded persons (ages 15-23) living in a state hospital in Kansas. The procedure used was actually a combination of those used in the previous two experiments. Each subject was read a story about a young (17) male target person who was either institutionalized and mentally retarded, or not labeled. In the story the target person tried to work on a jigsaw puzzle (cf. Severance & Gasstrom, 1977) and then he either succeeded on it, or failed. After hearing the label, but prior to receiving the outcome information, subjects were asked to predict how well they thought the boy would do on the puzzle (each subject was shown a copy of a similar puzzle) and to indicate how smart they thought he was.

After receiving the outcome information they were asked how well they thought they would have done on the puzzle. Finally, at the end of the story they were asked whether they thought the target person and they themselves were likely to get a good job, get married and have children.

Results

In general, the females tended to be somewhat more harsh on the (opposite sex) target person. Similar results are reported by Siperstein and Gottlieb (1977). Of more interest is the fact that the addition of the label "mentally retarded" to the institutional label led to a significantly lower rating of the labeled person on the adjective "smart" ($p < .01$; see Table 3). Consistent with this finding, the expectations of these retarded subjects were quite similar to those of the college students in the first experiment.

Insert Table 3 about here

That is, the labeled person received more pessimistic expectations on the question which asked how well they thought the target person would do on the puzzle ($p < .12$).[2] The results on the social success items were similar, but stronger, as the retarded person received lower expectations overall than did the nonretarded person ($p < .01$). This was qualified by a near-significant label x puzzle outcome interaction ($p = .07$) which indicated that it was the unsuccessful, retarded person who received the least favorable ratings (that cell was significantly different from all of the others, all p's $< .005$). Looking at the individual questions: the retarded person was thought to be

less likely to get a good job ($p < .05$), to have children ($p < .02$) and slightly less likely to get married ($p < .20$) than was the nonretarded person.

The label and the success of the target person did not have a significant effect on the subjects' predictions for their own success in life, however. A comparison of own vs. other predicted success revealed a tendency toward "modesty" in the form of a main effect of target person's outcome ($p < .006$; see Table 3). Subjects thought that they were more likely to succeed socially than the target person who failed on the puzzle and less likely to succeed than the person who had succeeded. The same results occurred on the question concerning subjects' expectations for their own performance on the jigsaw puzzle. Finally, the females were more pessimistic in their self-expectations than were the males ($p < .06$).

Discussion

The results on the first experiment did provide some evidence of positive prejudice toward retarded persons as did the Farina et al. (1976) research. The college students rated the labeled girl more favorably on two of the adjectives (likeable and hardworking) and she received more favorable evaluations on the social distance items in the failure condition. A similar favorability finding is reported by Carver and his colleagues (Carver, Glass, Snyder & Katz, 1977; Carver, Glass & Katz, 1978) in their research dealing with other "stigmatized" groups, such as the physically handicapped. They have termed this finding a "sympathy" effect, and they suggest that people tend to evaluate disadvantaged people and minorities more favorably because they feel sorry for them. (i.e., because of the extra difficulties that their "stigma" causes for

them). The current results add to this research by indicating that reactions to failure by stigmatized persons, in this case mentally retarded persons, are also characterized by sympathy. In particular, causal attributions made for their unsuccessful outcomes indicate that they receive less blame when they fail than do nonretarded persons. The fact that retarded persons are blamed less for failing may be one reason why the research cited by MacMillan, Jones and Aloia (1974) does not point to negative consequences associated with the label.

Expectations? The current results stand in sharp contrast to the sympathy research of Carver et al. in one respect, however. In their studies the stigmatized person received more favorable evaluations whether they had succeeded or failed; in fact, the successful, stigmatized person received more credit than the successful, nonstigmatized person. Presumably this was because the stigmatized persons received extra credit for succeeding in spite of their handicaps. This was definitely not the case in the current research. Even though the retarded person was doing quite well in life, she still received less favorable evaluations and more pessimistic predictions of future success, regardless of how much effort she put into what she was doing. The reason, of course, was that these evaluators saw the retarded girl's success as a fluke -- something over which she had little or no control -- that was unlikely to happen again. It would appear that these failure expectations are quite strong, and for this reason we suggest that the long-term effects of the patronization attitude are potentially very inhibiting. That is, although the retarded child may benefit temporarily from

the patronization attitudes, as was the case in the Farina et al. (1976) research, sooner or later s/he must cope with other's expectations for their failure. Given the pervasiveness of these expectations and the fact that they extend into behaviors such as raising a family -- i.e., behaviors that should not be severely effected by retardation -- then it appears that coping may be extremely difficult, especially for deinstitutionalized persons who are trying to live and work in the community.

Acceptance? The failure "prophecy" becomes self-fulfilling, only if the child accepts and internalizes the failure expectation himself or herself. The third experiment was designed to examine this question and the results were, at the same time, both discouraging and encouraging. The responses of the retarded persons in the second and third experiment indicated that they were aware of the stigma associated with state institutions and the meaning of the term "mentally retarded." More importantly, they tended to see the retarded boy as less likely to succeed on the puzzle ($p < .12$) -- essentially the same results as in the Severance and Gasstrom (1977) study. He was also seen as considerably less likely to succeed later in life at work and in family life. It thus appears that retarded adolescents, like the college students in the first experiment, have relatively pessimistic outlooks with regard to their peers' chances of succeeding in social and in cognitive activities. The results of the second and third studies taken together suggest that institutionalized retarded persons do not have positive opinions of each other, and that they do not like to be associated with other retarded persons or, at least, that they would prefer associating with others who are not retarded and institutionalized.

In sum, these results indicate that two of the three steps associated with the self-fulfilling prophecy do exist: The label does lead to lower expectations of performance (both cognitive and social) and labeled persons themselves have also apparently accepted these expectations.

Internalization? The third step appears to be missing, however, and in this sense the results may be encouraging. That is, these retarded people did not maintain the same low expectations for their own success on the cognitive task and social behaviors that they did for their retarded peers. On the social success items, for example, the retarded subjects made what might be considered a realistic assessment of their chances for success, relative to the target person's behavior. They expected more future success of themselves when the target person had failed at his task, and less success when the target person had been successful. There was a slight tendency toward an effect of label, as their self predictions did tend to resemble those given to the retarded target more than those given to the nonretarded target, however, this difference was weak ($p < .15$). In general, they were more optimistic about their own chances than those of the retarded person.

Self vs. Peer Expectations

Although there are many possible explanations for the discrepancy between the retarded persons' predictions of their own and their peers' success, three such explanations seem most obvious to us. The simplest of these explanations is that the retarded persons did not know or did not consider themselves to be mentally retarded. However, the results on the smart adjective and the expectation questions suggests that this is probably not the case. It seems

unlikely that these people would have what appears to be a reasonable understanding of what mental retardation is, without knowing that they were also mentally retarded. A second related possibility that does have some support in the data is that these people do have relatively unfavorable or pessimistic opinions of mentally retarded persons, but they do not typically identify with retarded persons or with the label. In fact, in the third study the male subjects' evaluations of the male target person tended to be more favorable than the female subjects' evaluations of him. Perhaps the more they could identify with the retarded person the more positive they felt toward him. What this suggests is that their self-concept may not be as low as their "group concept." and that it is advisable that an effort be made to enhance the opinions that they have of each other, even more than their opinions of themselves. This is especially important in light of the deinstitutionalization movement, and the current policy of placing retarded persons together in group settings in the community.

The third possibility is that the subjects' expectations were influenced by their age and the amount of time that they had been institutionalized. Thus, awareness of the expectations associated with the label may actually precede, temporally, the internalization of them. Again, there is some data to back this explanation up. In the second study, amount of time in the institution had a significant effect on the evaluations given to the retarded person, as those subjects who had been in the institution longer gave the most negative evaluations (on the social distance and preference questions). Similarly, in the third study the females gave the most negative

ratings to the retarded target person, and they also happened to have been institutionalized somewhat longer ($p < .15$). Since retarded people in institutions do appear to be aware of the stigma associated with their label and residence, it could very well be that their reactions to the label become more negative the longer they are exposed to and interact with other labeled persons.

The relationship between predictions for own and other (peers') success is clearly a complex one, especially when dealing with mentally retarded persons. Of course, right now our data only allow us to speculate on what that relationship is and how it develops. Nevertheless, the data do indicate that the label has an effect on how mentally retarded persons' behavior (successes and failures) are interpreted as well as the future behavioral outcomes that are expected of them. These effects apparently do filter down to mentally retarded children and adolescents and they are reflected in their own reactions to the label. This being the case, it is undoubtedly true that this awareness of the label does have some influence on their own performance expectations and on their motivation to succeed. It remains for future research to further clarify exactly what this effect is.

Footnotes

[1]This effect was stronger for people who had lived in the institution longer. Thus, the longer the subject had lived in the institution the more negative his/her evaluation of the retarded person and the more s/he preferred the nonretarded person on the social distance items.

A more complete description of the procedure and results of this study may be obtained by writing to the first author: Department of Psychology, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas 66045

[2]Again, this effect was stronger for people who had lived in the institution longer. An analysis of covariance performed on the puzzle-performance expectation question using time in the institution as a covariate revealed a stronger main effect of label ($p < .06$) with the nonretarded person again receiving more favorable responses.

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Table 1

College Students' Evaluations and Attributions

(Experiment I)

Question[1]	Positive Treatment		Negative Treatment	
	Retarded (20)[a]	Nonlabeled (19)	Retarded (20)	Nonlabeled (18)
Social Distance[2]	9.30	9.79	6.89	3.80
How successful is this person?	4.30	4.26	1.89	1.65
What is the reason? (Other things/Their doing)	2.95	5.00	2.39	5.60
Do better with more effort?	3.40	5.32	4.44	5.70
Social Success[3]	15.1	17.7	10.7	8.5

Note:

[a]Cell N's given in parentheses

[1]A high number represents a more favorable evaluation or a dispositional attribution. Scales = 1 - 7.

[2]This number represents the sum of the two social distance questions (Have as a friend? and Like to work with?) Scale = 2 - 14.

[3]This represents the sum of the predictions on the three social success questions (good job, marriage and having children); a high number represents a more favorable prediction. Scale = 3 - 21.

Table 2

Retarded Persons' Social Distance Responses

(Experiment II)

Question[1]	Institutionalized		Non-institutionalized	
	Positive (12)[a]	Negative (12)	Positive (13)	Negative (14)
Sum of the three social distance questions	12.92	9.70	14.31	11.78

Note:

[a]Cell N's given in parentheses

[1]A high number represents a more favorable evaluation or prediction. Scale = 3 - 15.

Table 3

Retarded Persons' Evaluations and Expectations

(Experiment III)

Question[1]	Retarded		Nonlabeled	
	Positive (10)[a]	Negative (12)	Positive (12)	Negative (11)
Smart[2]	2.77		3.87	
Expected puzzle performance[2]	3.45		3.74	
Sum of social success questions (other)[3]	8.20	6.67	8.50	8.18
Sum of social success questions (self)[3]	7.30	7.17	7.75	8.09

Note:

[a]Cell N's given in parentheses

[1]A high number represents a more favorable evaluation or prediction.

[2]These questions were asked prior to the outcome information. Scale in each case = 1 - 4, with 4 being the most favorable rating.

[3]This represents the sum of the three social success questions (job, marriage, children). Scale = 3 - 9.